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REPORT OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION

REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES, QUESTIONS RELATING TO REFUGEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS AND HUMANITARIAN QUESTIONS

JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

The coordination of activities related to early warning of possible refugee flows

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly the comments of the Administrative Committee on Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "The coordination of activities related to early warning of possible refugee flows" (A/45/649 and Corr.1).

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* A/46/50.

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Comments of the Administrative Committee on Coordination

I. GENERAL

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "The coordination of activities related to the early warning of possible refugee flows" (A/45/649 and Corr.1) contains an in-depth analysis of the policy framework for a coordinated early warning system and an extensive overview of the involvement of the United Nations system in activities relevant to early warning of possible refugee flows, as well as of the methods and techniques used by the organizations of the United Nations system for an early warning system. The main focus of the report is on the coordination of activities and on the best utilization of the immense potential of the organizations of the United Nations system, which are represented in all parts of the world and are involved, directly or indirectly, in various root causes of refugee flows. The Inspectors propose concrete recommendations, at the United Nations and inter-agency levels, aimed at overcoming the fragmentation of activities by designating a central focal point for the United Nations system and establishing a regular inter-agency mechanism. The report contains five recommendations, two of which are directed to the Secretary-General and were addressed in document A/45/649/Add.1, and three of which are addressed to the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC).

2. ACC members involved in activities related to refugees welcomed the report, which they found constructive and timely and meriting further consideration and follow-up within the United Nations system. They agreed with the underlying premise of the Unit's report that there is a need to make the United Nations system more effective in anticipating major humanitarian problems and they supported suggestions for improving the early warning capacity of the United Nations system in refugee matters through strengthening coordination.

3. At the same time, it was noted that the report could have been more specific as to the practical actions to be taken for improving the existing system, especially regarding information gathering and transmittal, and cooperation and coordination within the United Nations system, in particular at the field level. It was also suggested that the report might have explored ways and means of enlisting the support of Governments in the collection and transmission of politically sensitive information related to impending refugee flows.

II. SPECIFIC COMMENTS

Paragraph 2

4. It was noted that the statement of the Inspectors to the effect that early warning was not yet a regular component of work in the United Nations was not supported by facts. The report itself had identified a number of

early warning programmes already in existence in the United Nations system, including the Global Information and Early Warning System on Food and Agriculture of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), which was established in 1974.

Paragraph 5

5. It was noted that the concept of "refugee" was employed rather loosely in the report. The report would have benefited from a clear conceptual distinction between refugees and displaced persons. It was also emphasized that any analyses and suggestions concerning early warning activities should take fully into account the mandates and the limitations of various organizations of the United Nations system directly concerned, including in particular the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator (UNDRO).

6. In view of such long-term trends as global warming and climate change, the scope of the report could have included "ecological refugees" or "environmentally displaced persons". Moreover, human health aspects are closely linked to environmental conditions and should also be taken into account.

Paragraphs 45 and 46

7. The significance of the very numerous reports received from different non-governmental sources on situations of major human rights violations, which often contain elements of particular significance for early warning, was emphasized. However, it was pointed out that the lack of staff resources did not allow for an in-depth analysis of all the material received.

Paragraph 64

8. It was noted that, in addition to the relevant activities mentioned in the Inspectors' report, FAO provided assistance to developing countries and regional groupings in the development of national and subregional early warning systems. Further, steps had been taken recently to link FAO with the United Nations International Emergency Network, referred to in paragraph 44 of the report, and to set in motion FAO's cooperation with the United Nations Office for Research and the Collection of Information, as mentioned in paragraph 64 of the report.

Paragraph 67

9. It was suggested that, with its widespread network of field representatives, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) could effectively contribute to the early warning of refugee outflows. However, briefing and guidance, including specific indicators and instructions for appropriate monitoring, would be needed to prepare the field staff for this task.

Paragraph 69

10. It was pointed out that the World Health Organization (WHO) was working for effective coordination of the health aspects of emergency preparedness and response activities within the United Nations system and with non-governmental organizations involved in disaster relief. In particular, action involving epidemiological assessment of disasters and studies for improving early warning systems, including an effective system for possible refugee flows, was mentioned. WHO representatives in member States worked to introduce early warning of possible mass movements of people as an important component in the organization of health systems based on primary health care. This work dealt with internally displaced persons as well as international refugees and had assumed growing importance as a result of the recent political and economic changes. WHO also worked closely with UNDRO and was linked to the United Nations International Emergency Network, providing and sharing information with the electronically linked members of the world-wide disaster management system.

Paragraph 110

11. It was noted that while the report suggests that the Consultative Committee on Substantive Questions (Operational Activities) might be the right forum in view of its current consideration of refugee issues, it should be borne in mind that the Consultative Committee so far reviewed the question of response to existing refugee problems with a special focus on relatively long-term development-oriented solutions. There exists at present no special expertise in the Committee to deal with the technical questions of methodologies in early warning.

Paragraph 112

12. It was emphasized that FAO was at the forefront in gathering and disseminating early warning information during the Sahelian famine and the locust infestation of 1986-1990. It provided many affected countries with modern communicatior equipment, including facsimile machines, for rapid exchange of information.

13. It was felt that insufficient attention was given to UNDRO's unique computerized system for the immediate dissemination of alert messages to a large number of recipients. UNDRO's almost daily situation reports on a great variety of natural and man-made emergencies did convey evaluated information to several hundred decision makers. The Office's heavy involvement in disseminating early warning messages during the great Sahelian famine and during the widespread locust infestation of 1986/87, in cooperation with FAO, were but a few examples of what can be achieved when existing mechanisms are properly coordinated and utilized. It was also pointed out that the United Nations International Emergency Network, in view of its planned development, could serve as a permanent base for any early warning system.

III. COMMENTS ON RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation No. 1

In order to introduce early warning as a regular component of work and to increase the early warning capacity of the United Nations system in refugee matters by improving its coordination, ACC should:

(a) Include in the agenda of its forthcoming session an item on early warning of possible refugee flows and further consider this subject from time to time as needed (paras. 108, 110 and 124);

(b) Designate a central focal point of the United Nations system for the coordination and monitoring of factors related to possible refugee flows (paras. 106, 108 and 124);

(c) Establish a working group on early warning of refugee flows, consisting of representatives of the Office for Research and the Collection of Information, UNHCR, the Centre for Human Rights, UNDRO, FAO and UNESCO, as well as those of the Office of the Director-General for Development and International Economic Co-operation, UNDP, the Department of Public Information, WFP and WMO, to work out practical measures for modes of cooperation and procedures to develop an effective early warning system for refugees (paras. 106 and 125);

(d) Set forth a regular inter-agency consultative mechanism that should consider concrete cases of early warning of possible refugee flows and meet urgently in case of emergencies (the Office for Research and the Collection of Information and UNHCR serving as the joint convener and secretariat of such a mechanism) (paras. 108 and 124);

(e) Make arrangements for United Nations resident coordinators to serve as coordination points for early warning of refugee flows in the field (paras. 117, 118 and 126).

14. ACC welcomed the general thrust of this recommendation. It would consider at an early occasion the most desirable arrangement for the coordination of inter-agency activities related to early warning of refugee flows, including the designation and the role of a system-wide focal point and the responsibilities of field offices. In this connection, ACC would take into account the mandates, responsibilities and work done by different organizations of the system and the existing inter-agency cooperative mechanisms in this field.

15. It was generally felt that the Office for Research and the Collection of Information was best placed to take the lead and should be designated as the central focal point of the United Nations system for the coordination and monitoring of factors related to possible flows of refugees and displaced persons. In cooperation with the agencies and offices concerned, the Office should carry primary responsibility for progress in early warning work.

16. Several organizations, while stating their willingness to participate in a working group, pointed out that the paramount consideration in the case of emergencies was speedy response on the part of the United Nations system and expressed concern that a formal mechanism might slow down response. It was also suggested that research should be done on sample refugee flows to determine indicators that would help the United Nations prepare more adequately and assure ready access to refugees.

17. Some other organizations cautioned that, before setting up costly inter-agency mechanisms, the potential inherent in the traditional reporting system based on information collected in the field should be further explored.

18. Several organizations emphasized the crucial role played by the resident coordinators in the early warning process and in the coordination of the activities of the relevant agencies in the field and felt that the report had not sufficiently appreciated these functions. It was pointed out that resident coordinators were responsible for operational activities and information analyses and that, in several African countries, they were working with Governments to develop emergency prevention and preparedness strategies that included early warning systems and contingency planning programmes. Such activities, if they had not already been so oriented, could be adapted to provide early warning systems for mass displacement.

Recommendation No. 2

The Secretary-General should make administrative arrangements (financial, staffing, etc.) for the Office for Research and the Collection of Information within the resources available aiming at increasing the capacity of this Office in early warning of refugee flows (paras. 39, 75 and 121).

19. The comments of the Secretary-General on this recommendation are contained in document A/45/649/Add.1.

Recommendation No. 3

Further to the ACC decisions related to recommendation No. 1, the executive heads of relevant organizations of the United Nations system should make internal arrangements as may be appropriate with a view to strengthening early warning activities related to refugee flows, and particularly by:

(a) Assuring the rapid transmission of information to the Office for Research and the Collection of Information and to the executive heads of specialized agencies that may assist the Secretary-General to discharge his responsibilities for early warning of possible refugee flows and may enable the organizations to address more efficiently the problems in undertaking their operational activities (paras. 16, 114 and 124);

(b) Taking measures to reorganize, wherever necessary, relevant information within their respective organization or office and strengthen their information management methods for better contributions to early warning (paras. 111 and 123);

(c) Making necessary administrative and technical arrangements so as to achieve the highest possible degree of sharing of equipment and communication facilities within the United Nations system, in particular at the field level (paras. 101, 112 and 127).

20. ACC agreed with this recommendation, while emphasizing that greater consultation on the handling, transmission and evaluation of information should precede any action in this sphere. It would be necessary to define more clearly what information was relevant to the system, who was to make it available and to whom, and the problems of source allocation and data protection would have to be addressed. Another issue that needed to be more broadly discussed was that of the access of organizations to information and assessments generated by a coordinated system.

21. ACC also noted that the implementation of this recommendation would require adequate additional resources. It was suggested that a concise cost-benefit analysis of the proposed arrangements be made prior to their being operationalized.

Recommendation No. 4

With a view to expediting the work related to early warning of possible refugee flows, the Office for Research and the Collection of Information should:

(a) Reconsider its methodologies to develop an effective system for early warning of possible refugee flows, particularly by taking into account existing methods and techniques for monitoring within and outside the United Nations system (paras. 38, 74-93 and 121);

(b) Give a priority to the finalization of specific indicators concerning root causes of refugee outflows (paras. 38, 77, 78 and 121);

(c) Take an initiative in promoting consultative discussions with entities that may contribute to early warning (paras. 38, 106 and 122);

(d) Further develop links with existing databases within the Secretariat and the United Nations system, as well as with external sources (paras. 76, 114 and 127).

22. The comments of the Secretary-General on this recommendation are contained in document A/45/649/Add.1. ACC supported the thrust of the recommendation.

Recommendation No. 5

(a) Entities involved in early warning of refugee flows should pay more attention to the research results of several institutions (e.g. UNU, UNITAR, the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, UNESCO, etc.) with a view to benefiting from the intellectual input of these institutions for their operational activities (paras. 115 and 128);

(b) Research institutions of the United Nations system should make more efforts to disseminate information on their work related to the alert function by sending their products to the entities involved (paras. 61 and 128).

23. The comments of the Secretary-General on part (a) of this recommendation are contained in document A/45/649/Add.1. ACC fully agreed with this recommendation.

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Note by the Secretary-General

Corrigendum

The agenda items should read as above.

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